

first four chapters. Even then some questions remain about the long period of development of the two uniting communions. It is appropriate, then, to sketch out, with a selective use of a vast body of material, the historical development of denominations known until 1957 as the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. To do that is to uncover the unique features of the kinship which these groups have rediscovered as the United Church of Christ.

CHAPTER 6

FROM MOVEMENT TO DENOMINATION: THE CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN STORY

Congregational origins are the subject of an immense body of research. As a movement nurtured in the English Puritan Reformation, it shared with other groups claiming that heritage some concepts of the nature of the church and its organization that in one form or another have affected much of American Protestantism. At the same time scholars have found in Congregational development some of the most distinctive ideas of Puritanism.

Debate rather than agreement, however, has characterized much of that research over the past fifty years. Even at this date a clear picture of Congregational origins is not easily gained. There is general agreement that historians writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were inclined to read into the early New England life some of the prevailing nineteenth-century democratic accents on individual rights and religious liberty. However, H. Shelton Smith points out that "one of the surprising turns in contemporary historical research concerns the origin of Congregationalism," in which that tendency is challenged.¹ Some new and helpful perspectives are now available for understanding this particular expression of Reformed church life. They are of especial significance for understanding why it was possible for Congregationalists to join with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in forming the United Church of Christ.

Denominational models of church life inhibit the effort to understand Congregational origins. Such models have only nineteenth- and twentieth-century frames of reference; they are inapplicable to the early seventeenth-century milieu of religious organization in which the Congregational models of church life began to evolve. The Puritan movement, which eventually gave birth to such models, had little concern in the beginning for the framing of a new type of church organization. As Edmund S. Morgan has pointed out, divisions among the Puritans over the "form" of the church became acute only after they achieved control of the English Parliament in 1641.² At that time quite diverse points of view began to develop.

Then some Puritans preferred to leave each individual church independent of outside control, while others thought that the ministers of the churches should be organized into presbyteries, consociations, and synods in order to

enforce orthodoxy among themselves. Those who held the latter view became known as Presbyterians; those who held the former were called Independents or Congregationalists.³

Behind these gradually diverging points of view, however, were some shared convictions about the nature of the church, which had been hammered out of the struggle to cleanse the Church of England throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century. Much of the impulse for this came from the influence of John Calvin in Geneva, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, and Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr in the Rhineland. It was to these Reformers that many English Protestants fled in 1553 when Queen Mary restored Catholic practice. After Mary's death these exiles brought to the motherland strong convictions about the internal independence of the church that they had learned in the Rhineland. They knew the church as a people gathered out of the world by the preaching of the gospel who, in the unity of the Spirit, strengthened one another, enabling all to frame their lives by the Word of God. God's sovereign rule through the Word would not tolerate either ecclesiastical or political interference.

These shared convictions were used in a variety of ways. Many Puritans remained faithful to the Anglican tradition, seeking to purify the church from within. Others organized new congregations after the model of church government in Calvin's Geneva; these were the Presbyterians. Those most influenced by the Rhineland Reformers were the Independents or nonconformists. They held that the "visible church is a *particular congregation*, never a diocesan or national body," having full power to order its life because Christ is Head of the church.⁴ For these Independents the church was gathered by mutual covenanting, based upon the covenant of grace that God had made known through the Word and sealed in the sacraments.

These foundational ideas about the church were shared by the Separatists. They differed from the Independents in their relationship to the Church of England. As the name implies, separatism meant complete separation from the Church of England, denying that a corrupt church could be the true church. Independents, while asserting the right and obligation to govern their life in the church under Christ, did not deny that the true church could also be found within the Church of England.

As the Puritan movement flowed to New England shores, its undifferentiated forms of church organization were tested in completely new circumstances. Out of that testing came the basic strains of Congregational church life.

ORIGINS OF THE NEW ENGLAND WAY

The cartographer's tracing of Congregational origins pinpoints sites on both sides of the Atlantic. Each site is significant for particular developments in the Puritan movement as it faced the need to shape a church in conformity with its

vision. England, Holland, and New England witnessed and shared in the struggle of totally dedicated Puritans to be obedient to their convictions. Not given to reticence about their views, they have left a wealth of detailed, but sometimes confusing, printed materials by which later generations can enter into their journeys.

Although Elizabeth, who succeeded Mary on the throne in 1558, was Protestant, her regime continually frustrated the hopes of nonconforming Puritans. The result was another exodus to the Continent in the early 1600s, largely, but not exclusively, of those who were known as Separatists. Sometimes known as Brownists (after Robert Browne, of Norwich) or Barrowists (after Henry Barrow, the most rigid Separatist of them all), their location in Holland was significant. There they were free to organize, discuss, debate, and reorganize. This resulted in a mellowing of positions about the church, which eventually brought non-separatist and separatist strains of thinking closer together as the movement began toward America.

John Robinson, however, is the focus of attention in Holland. This dedicated Puritan pastor brought most of his congregation from Scrooby, England to Amsterdam in 1608 and then to Leyden in 1609, where they remained for eleven years. There they sought to be a disciplined body of believers gathered by the Word, formed by the Spirit, and leading a holy life. From the strong Reformed influences of the Rhineland, they learned "the principles of mutual edification and fraternal correction" so essential to the community of faith.⁵

Separatist though he was, Robinson was not intolerant of nonseparating Puritans. In Holland he had intimate ties with Henry Jacob and William Ames, two outstanding thinkers of the nonseparatist tradition who had fled to Holland because of the threats of the English ecclesiastical authorities. Current scholarship agrees that this association led finally to some modification of Robinson's separatist views.⁶ In particular, Jacob's influence on Robinson can be seen in the latter's change of attitude toward the Church of England, a change noted by others. More important is the evidence in the *Seven Articles* of the Leyden Church, signed by Robinson and William Brewster, a ruling elder of the church. Articles four, five, and six exhibit an attitude toward the Church of England and the authority of the bishops that belie a rigid separatist position.⁷ This document, prepared apparently about three years before the journey to Plymouth, not only shows the influence of Jacob and Ames as powerful thinkers but also the fluid character of Puritan understandings of the church at that time, both among Separatists and non-Separatists.

Americans generally, not only Congregationalists, find the stirring account of the pilgrimage of the Leyden congregation to the New England shores a treasured document.⁸ Told by William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Colony, the story of that epic voyage is eloquent testimony of the indomitable spirit of those

Puritans who knew themselves as "not their own but God's." "They knew they were pilgrims," wrote Bradford as they left Holland. Their place in Congregational origins was anchored at Plymouth Rock, but the extent of their role in the forming of the American Congregational tradition can be traced only by turning first to the other and larger migration of Puritans, who settled in Massachusetts Bay Colony nearly a decade later.

Nonseparating Puritans were more numerous in England and later also in New England than were the Separatists. Their journey to the New World had a pronouncedly different motive from that of the Separatists. They came, as Samuel Danforth said, "on an errand into the wilderness"; their aim was example and reform not separation. The Church of England was their spiritual mother, as Gov. John Winthrop emphasized. Winthrop's *A Modell of Christian Charity* gave clear indication of the colony's purpose and role.⁹

A comparison of Winthrop's document and Bradford's account of *The Mayflower Compact* provides illuminating perceptions of both the different concerns prevailing in these two colonizing efforts and their different self-understandings as Puritans. Winthrop illustrates the profound sense of going to the New World "under orders." There was a task to be done, a commission to fulfill. In consequence, the document is strongly homiletical, using a hortatory style that culminates in a warning: "for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, . . . soe that if we shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."¹⁰ Winthrop sought to mold these Puritans into a body of vision-oriented colonists.

Bradford's account of the Leyden pilgrim's approach to the colonizing task is largely descriptive, but it includes *The Mayflower Compact*. That compact had been made necessary by the fact that among the *Mayflower* passengers were many "strangers"—not of the Leyden Church—who had joined the ship in England. "Occasioned partly by the discontented and mutinous speeches" that some of the "strangers" made, the *Compact*, according to Bradford, was "the first foundation of their govermente in this place."¹¹

The *Compact* was, as H. Shelton Smith points out, nothing more than a church covenant adapted for civic use.¹² Its distinction is in the establishment of a "civill body politick" based on social contract and not upon the authority of civil magistrates appointed by the Crown. This in itself differentiated the Plymouth Colony from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where civil authority continued to be derived from the Crown and was linked to ecclesiastical authority. From the beginning the Plymouth Puritans were a covenant-based church. The covenant was the "authority" that founded order in the life of the church.

When the nonseparating Puritans settled in Massachusetts Bay, they were not as clear in their thinking about the issue of the authority by which the church

could define itself. If the church is, as John Field claimed in 1572, a "company or congregatione of the faythfull called and gathered out of the worlde by the preachinge of the Gospell, . . ." who were the faithful?¹³ The Separatists had answered that by a consistent use of the covenant. The Bay Puritans had not been as consistent simply because through years of struggle in the mother country they could not fully reconcile their Puritan understanding of the church with their loyalty to the Church of England. Edmund S. Morgan claimed that by their refusal to separate from the Church of England, the nonseparating Puritans deprived themselves of the opportunity to put their ideas fully into practice. . . . There is evidence that a few ministers gathered together special groups from within a church or from several churches. The members bound themselves to one another by covenant but also remained as members of their regular parish churches.¹⁴

Their arrival in New England gave nonseparating Puritans their first experience in forming the church. Their principles were clear enough, but what would be their practice in a land where the mother church did not exist and where long-time parish memberships did not prevail? Could they form the church under the principles enunciated by Henry Jacob, one of their number, who is sometimes called the father of Congregational church theory? His summary included:

- (1) The visible church is a particular congregation, never a diocesan or national body;
- (2) the church is formally gathered through mutual covenanting;
- (3) the church is composed of holy or regenerate believers;
- (4) the supreme head of the church is Jesus Christ, from whom the church has immediate and full power to order its entire life, without determination or control by any overhead body.¹⁵

These were principles affirmed by all Puritans, including the Separatists, but only the latter group had practiced the principles consistently by going first to Holland, then to Plymouth. Now, in Massachusetts Bay, the non-Separatists were in the position of doing what many of them, when in England, had criticized the Separatists for doing.

What happened at Massachusetts Bay continues to be surrounded with questions and speculation. Two quite opposite points of view are held: one insisting that the nonseparating Puritans there established a distinctive form of church order¹⁶; the other contending that by reason of a visit from the Plymouth Colony, the Bay people were converted to a separatist position.¹⁷

That the Plymouth Separatists did not influence the founding of the first church in the Bay—Salem—would seem to fly in the face of facts. In 1629, when Salem was founded, leading members of the Plymouth Colony were present. Edmund S. Morgan argues convincingly that the Bay Puritans probably sought and willingly received counsel from these visitors about voluntary church

organization, in which the Plymouth colonists were experienced.¹⁸ The constituting of the church by entering into a covenant with God and with one another and the ordaining of a pastor and a teacher were marks of separatist influence. There was, however, no claim of separation from the Church of England. In fact, John Cotton, who came to the Bay four years later, took great care to deny that there had been any undue separatist influence from Plymouth in his tract *The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared* (1648).¹⁹

What, then, were the features of church life worked out by the Bay Puritans that so affected New England for generations? In seeking to answer that question it is important to bear in mind that the Congregational Way in New England evolved over a period of years, so that some distinguishing features did not appear until fifteen years later. During that time there were changes in both the Bay and the Plymouth settlements and consequently some distinctions appear blurred.

It is clear that Bay Puritans were not Separatists in the sense of separation from the Church of England, while Plymouth Puritans were clearly Separatists in that sense. But both groups were "separatists" in the sense of being "called out" of the world, separated from worldly behavior. The distinctive feature of Bay Puritanism, which became, in John Cotton's words, the "Congregational Way," was the accent on the covenant of grace. It is God's grace working in the human heart that generates faith. That faith, then, obligates the Christian "to joyn willingly together in Christian communion and orderly covenant, and by free confession of the faith . . . , to unite themselves unto . . . visible congregations."²⁰ When Cotton accentuated faith as God's work, he was implying criticism of the Separatists, who, although in agreement about grace as essential, tended to emphasize the fruits of grace by their requirement of a church covenant aimed at good behavior. For Cotton that meant the Separatists were establishing the church on a covenant of works rather than on the covenant of grace.

The Congregational Way as developed by Bay Puritans laid stress, then, not on the church covenant as the foundation of the church but upon the covenant of grace, which made a saving faith possible.²¹ The church covenant was simply an implementing device for the assembling into a body (congregation) of those who knew grace or, in other words, had "saving faith." Again, then, the question was: Who has this saving faith? As Congregational church life developed in the first decade of the Bay Colony's existence, the "testing" of persons seeking admission to the church for the purpose of identifying "saving faith" became a complex and restrictive procedure. Its subtle intention was to see that the church was made up only of "Visible Saints." The experience of saving faith became the major concern of the Christian, and the definition of that experience was the concern of the churches, especially of the ministers.

Formalizing the order of church life called "congregational" took place at Cambridge. A "synod," that is, an assembly of "elders and messengers" of the churches, gathered to consider their direction and the problems that defied mutual counsel on a voluntary basis. Called originally by the General Court of the Bay Colony in 1646, the synod's work was not completed until the third session, in 1648, when it produced what is known as the *Cambridge Platform*. Distinguished by its delineation of the Congregational understanding of church government, the *Platform* represented the fruit of the efforts of Bay Puritans to be responsible to their vision of God's will for the church.²²

THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY TESTED

The *Cambridge Platform* has been called New England Congregationalism's "monument." That designation has an unintended appropriateness when it is remembered that monuments often honor achievements past and gone. Up until the time the Cambridge Synod formulated the *Platform*, the vitality of the Congregational Way developed by the Bay Puritans had been evident in the numbers of people gathered into churches. More than fifty churches could be counted as the product of the zeal and dedication these colonists brought to their calling as Christians. But the problems that prompted the calling of the synod in the first place were not soon to be solved. The Congregational Way entered a time of testing, which brought far-reaching changes both to the form of the churches and to their faith.

Any survey of the writings of the latter half of the seventeenth-century New England experience readily shows the nature of that testing. Caused by a combination of social and religious circumstances—second-generation lack of spiritual fervor, growing religious pluralism, declining Puritan influence in England—this testing is shown in two defensive developments: the Half-Way Covenant and the Reforming Synod of 1679.

The first was a compromising solution to the problem presented by church members who, although in the covenant, were not in full communion because they had not given evidence of "saving faith," but who still wanted their children baptized. These "half-way" church members could hardly be denied the desire for their children's baptism without driving them out of the church. In 1662 elders and messengers from the churches gathered in Boston to act in concert to authorize such baptisms. This action, the so-called Half-Way Covenant, was a break in the exclusivistic pattern of the early Congregational Way. Inevitably, it had a liberalizing effect and began to sap the vitality that the churches had known.

The second defensive development—the Reforming Synod of 1679—was called out of a concern to improve discipline and order in the churches. Although accompanied by a day of fasting and prayer in the churches, the synod's

efforts were nonproductive. Nothing came of the reiteration of the demand for faithfulness to the *Cambridge Platform*; that monument seemed to have turned into stone.²³

This breaking away from tradition generated storms of controversy. One liberalizer who was more influential than the others, Solomon Stoddard, was at the heart of the dispute. At the Northampton church, where he served nearly sixty years, Stoddard demonstrated a concern for evangelism that bore fruit in several periods of spiritual awakening among the people. But Stoddard became increasingly dissatisfied with the restrictions of the Bay traditions and especially with the Half-Way Covenant. He refused to debar from the eucharist those who had not been able to make a confession of a saving faith (an ever-increasing number) but who had owned the covenant. He saw the eucharist as a converting ordinance whose nurturing effect should be withheld from no one who had made even a beginning profession of faith.

Two powerful cultural and religious developments of the turn of the century, extending nearly to the Revolution, that drastically changed the Congregational Way even as they did all of New England social and political life, were the growing strength of the Enlightenment in England and the rise of revivalism, known in America as the Great Awakening. On the Continent of Europe, but especially in England, the Enlightenment heightened human critical sensitivities and so produced increasing human self-confidence. Christian churches, which had so long dominated not only the spiritual but the intellectual life of western Europe, responded sometimes with resistance but also with accommodation. Out of resistance came efforts at spiritual revival. Out of accommodation came intellectual trends in theology that brought much internal struggle for the churches. The influence of these movements flowing to America from Europe is seen in the changes that took place in the eighteenth century, before the Revolution.

Not only did the churches of Massachusetts suffer spiritual decline, but all the way down the Connecticut River Valley to New Haven the loss of spiritual vitality had made inroads that were of great concern. While the struggle against liberalizing trends in Massachusetts never seemed to reverse the spiritual decline in the churches in that period, a different experience developed in Connecticut. The critical turning point was the convening of a synod at Saybrook, by order of the General Assembly of the colony, and the adoption in 1708 of what was known as the *Saybrook Platform*.

THE WAY REDESIGNED

The influence of the *Saybrook Platform* has been variously assessed, but it is clear that the document was produced by (and itself produced) forces that were to have a long-range effect in the shaping of Congregationalism. Sydney E.

Ahlstrom, writing on the 250th anniversary of the synod, makes this evaluation: Few New Englanders could have foreseen that the turn-of-the-century decades which lay ahead were to witness a permanent bifurcation of that old Puritan region which in 1648 had sealed its spiritual unity in the *Cambridge Platform*. . . . It is, I think, sufficiently clear that a critical "time of decision" had arrived in New England; . . . there began to emerge two ecclesiastical and intellectual provinces which in time would become still more clearly defined and sharply opposed.²⁴

Most significant for consideration of the emergence of the Congregational Way into the Congregational Churches as a distinguishable church body in America were the polity principles laid down by the synod and adopted by the Connecticut General Court in New Haven. For the voluntary and fellowship responsibilities between the churches as set forth in the Congregational Way of the *Cambridge Platform*, Saybrook substituted procedures emphasizing the obligation of "consociation" of neighboring churches. The purpose of consociation was mutual assistance in all church matters and an orderly procedure for adjudication of dispute. This telling—and controversial—provision called for "the sentence of non-communion" against pastors and churches who refused to submit to consociation.²⁵

Commentators, then and since, have pointed to the so-called "Presbyterianizing tendencies" in the *Saybrook Platform*. Obviously, the effort was directed toward the protection of the churches more than toward their control. Nevertheless, the threat of control was there, resulting in a cautious interpretation of the more ambiguous portions of the *Platform* so as to preserve the independence of each church. In any case, the *Saybrook Platform* accomplished much of what was intended: orderly procedure and, above all, mutual support.

Testimony to the appropriateness of both the intention and the accomplishment lies in the predominant influence Saybrook had in the shaping of Congregationalism over the following one hundred fifty years. Apart from Saybrook or a similar arrangement, it is doubtful that the Congregational Way could have maintained and extended itself as the nation expanded westward. Three kinds of benefits accrued to the Congregational churches as a result of the influence of the *Platform*.

First, consociation and its related provisions enabled Congregational churches to withstand the divisive forces brought into the church and the culture by the two Great Awakenings, the Revolution, and the slavery issue. Second, consociation equipped these churches to deal constructively with the rising religious pluralism that eventually took away the privileged majority position the early Puritans had enjoyed in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Third, by their experience in consociation these churches were able to respond to the missionary challenge of the westward expansion of the nation. An example of the latter

is the *Plan of Union* of 1801 with the Presbyterians, which was designed for cooperative work on the frontier.*

Of equal interest but of less significance for the shaping of Congregationalism for the future were certain events that occurred in Massachusetts during the same period as the Saybrook developments. Liberal trends had alarmed the more conservative Boston clergy for some time. Matters came to a head when some of the more aggressive laypeople, who were not afraid to challenge the older clergy, broke with tradition and took the lead in founding the Brattle Street Church. These "innovators" called a Presbyterian minister to serve the church and introduced the use of the Lord's Prayer in the regular worship. In what seemed to add insult to injury, this group issued a *Manifesto* that caused Increase Mather and his son, Cotton, to react in true conservative style.

Out of the ensuing pamphlet war and debate came a set of *Proposals*, produced by a convention of ministers of the Boston area in 1705. Essentially these *Proposals* sought to achieve the same kind of restoration of order and cohesiveness among the churches that was to be found in the *Saybrook Platform* of Connecticut. But the *Proposals* met with immediate resistance, much of it led by John Wise, whose book *The Churches' Quarrel Espoused* had a powerful role in reshaping Massachusetts Congregationalism in a liberal direction. The significance of Wise's book lies in his use of Enlightenment thought, with its accent on natural law, to support the New England Way. Here was the movement of accommodation that introduced vigorous strains of European (especially English) rationalism into American church life.

However, Williston Walker, noted Congregational historian, claimed that the failure of the conservative forces (the Mathers and their supporters) to achieve what the Saybrook Synod had accomplished was not due simply or even primarily to John Wise's influence; rather, it was a result of the aloofness of the civil authorities in Massachusetts. They did not support the cause of the majority of concerned clergy in the same way that the Connecticut General Court acted for the churches.²⁶ Perhaps the real import of John Wise as spokesman for the rising liberal movement was his shift of authority in the church from its Puritan base in the authority of Christ expressed through the scriptures and the experience of a saving faith, to a base in the will of the people—in short, in church democracy. The event that brought radical change to church life in Massachusetts was the founding of the Brattle Street Church in 1699; the rationale

*The *Plan of Union* will be discussed later in this chapter. It is important to point out in this connection, however, that early New England Puritan colonists did not differentiate so absolutely between Presbyterian and Congregational ways. Presbyterian Puritans in New England generally were members of the established churches, which were Congregational. Presbyterian self-consciousness among the Puritans gradually increased, especially after the heavy Scots-Irish immigration into the Middle Colonies in the early 1700s. The first Presbyterian churches were founded on Long Island around 1640 by some New England Puritans.

was provided by John Wise in 1713 and more fully in 1717 when he published *A Vindication of the Government of New-England Churches*.

Thus, the redesign of the Congregational Way in Connecticut and Massachusetts during the late seventeenth to the eighteenth century exhibited two quite different sets of energies. In Connecticut these energies reflected a beginning resurgence of spiritual fervor that drew heavily upon its long-time tradition of Puritan faith, while at the same time adjusting to the challenges of a changing religious and cultural situation. In Massachusetts these energies reflected the introduction of the intellectual perspectives of the Enlightenment, reinterpreting the New England Way in categories that were to become a permanent feature not only of American intellectual life but of its social and political experience as well. The Massachusetts experience symbolized in a small way the interaction between the Protestant faith and the Enlightenment that has characterized the nation's cultural development up through the nineteenth century.²⁷ It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that this remained isolated from the Connecticut experience. The Great Awakening of the mideighteenth century proved to be the event and the force that brought these two sets of energies together in New England.

CONGREGATIONALISM IN TRANSITION

American religious history draws more of its central themes from the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s than from any other event or movement. While it is possible to exaggerate its impact, there is greater likelihood of underestimating it because of the stereotypes so often employed to describe it as a religious phenomenon. It was a complex convergence of religious, social, intellectual, and political forces that defies simple analysis. Such a statement is intended as a caution in viewing the Awakening in terms that are simplistic.

In New England the central figure was Jonathan Edwards. His thought and work gave the Awakening a stamp that was not matched by any other person, even though in the Middle Colonies especially there were powerful leaders whose revival work had begun nearly a decade earlier. Of Edwards' influence on Congregationalism, Sydney E. Ahlstrom has written:

A new and irrepressible expectancy entered the life of the churches. A national sense of intensified religious and moral resolution was born. . . . Evangelicalism in a new key was abroad in the land, and its workings had a steady internal effect which was nowhere more apparent than in the Congregational churches.²⁸

The significance of Edwards for the Congregational churches is to be seen not only in his spiritual insightfulness and intellectual brilliance but also in what he represented. He was a product of Yale—not of Harvard which even then was the venerable bastion of the Puritan tradition. He was a grandson of Solomon Stoddard, whose liberalizing tendencies had been abhorred by Boston conser-

vatives. Edwards represented the redesigned Congregational Way of Connecticut.²⁹

His ministry in Northampton, where his grandfather had once served, is cited as the start of the Great Awakening in New England. But times of spiritual revival had been known there even under Stoddard. More important for understanding Edwards' part in the Awakening are his writings, the most important being the *Treatise on the Religious Affections* and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*. His legacy to American Protestantism was a modified Calvinism that incorporated experiential religion (that is, the factor of the experience of God's work in the human soul) into the mainstream of the Reformed faith. In that emphasis Edwards provided a rationale for a dominant characteristic of the Puritan faith, the experience of saving grace. What happens within the human spirit as a result of faith in God's justifying work in Christ is the key to understanding justification. Sanctification, then, as the direct work of God's grace through the Spirit, assumed a major place not only in the Reformed tradition of the Congregational churches but also in much of American Protestantism. The distortions that Edwards' legacy has suffered resulted from the failure to heed his insistence upon God as the active participant in the transformation of the human spirit: God as the initiator, God as the designer, God as the one toward whom all things move. Recent scholarship attests to the stature of Edwards' work and his role in shaping American religious life.

No powerful spiritual or intellectual movement ever leaves unmixed blessings. The Awakening in New England, in the Middle Colonies, and in the South left many different marks.* Because it was a movement of great vitality, evidences of it can be traced for many decades. Among the Congregational churches—concentrated as they were in New England where the religious, social, and political traditions already had long histories—the negative aspects of the Awakening seem prominent. Theological divisions already in existence before the Awakening were sharpened by it. Edwardean thinking was known as the New Divinity; then there were the liberals on one side and the Old Calvinists on the other. Such theological divisions had both positive and negative effects. On the whole, the intellectual vigor of the Awakening remained with the Edwardean group.

Of greater significance generally for the Congregational churches in New England was the resurgence of separatism. Always a latent force in churches of the Congregational Way, the separatist impulse in Connecticut was strengthened when many churches resisted the so-called presbyterianizing

*Readers are referred, in addition to books cited, to: Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, *The Great Awakening* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967); Edwin Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

Saybrook Platform. Heightened emotions and renewed insistence upon evidence of saving faith brought on by the Awakening resulted in a movement toward "believer's baptism." Nearly one hundred "separated" churches in New England became "Baptist." Beyond that was a persistent separatistic tendency in many churches.

The positive effects of the Awakening's energies were exhibited in the vitality of the churches as they began to extend their horizons in missionary and evangelistic zeal. Lefferts Loetscher points out that: "The Awakening elevated the common man. By giving him a self-authenticating religious experience it made him independent of professional ministers and church synods. *Lay activity and lay authority in the church increased.*"³⁰ This accentuation of the laity's place in the church marked a definitive break with the long Western Christian tradition of the central role of the clergy. The Reformation had not removed the clergy from the center since the all-important task of interpreting the Word as the chief authority of life was reserved to them. But when the Awakening moved the believers' experience of regenerating grace to center stage in the life of the churches, they no longer depended upon the authority of the Word and its preacher. Protestant churches to this day struggle with the consequent ambiguities about the role of the clergy. At the same time their experience of the new place of the laity subsequent to the Awakening has been marked by vigorous involvement in the churches in ways that gave a new face to American Protestantism.

A concluding word about the effect of the Awakening on the church life of New England, particularly the Congregational churches, most naturally falls on Jonathan Edwards' vision of "the social redemption of humanity." That vision was based on his understanding of God's sovereignty. He saw the divine purpose of redemption not in individual terms only but in corporate and social terms as well. The Reformed faith had for him, as for so many before him, an ultimate focus upon the transformation of life and the society. That legacy remains a motivating force in the nation's idealism as well as in the churches' commitment to active social efforts.

Congregationalism in transition between 1720 and 1800 was affected by influences other than the Great Awakening. Social and political trends from Europe made their mark. Of equal importance was intercolony awareness of common concerns, an awareness that increased with the Great Awakening but which was enhanced by growing communication and trade. As the colonies moved toward independence from the mother country and into the task of forming a new nation, the energies of the churches tended in directions of support. The surge of philanthropic and educational enterprises spurred by the Awakening continued. Even as it did, however, the spiritual life of the churches waned. Changed social, economic, and political circumstances were partially responsible. At the same time the intellectual revolution produced by the En-

lightenment gradually eroded the more orthodox faith of the churches that had been revived by the Awakening. When independence came and the Revolution was over, the churches were suffering a spiritual malaise of considerable magnitude.

CONGREGATIONALISM IN THE ERA OF DENOMINATIONS

Congregationalism in the nineteenth century reveals its distinctive character on the American scene when viewed against the backdrop of the proliferating denominational organizations of that period.* Four especially formative developments must be taken into consideration: disestablishment, the use of voluntary organizations, the Second Great Awakening, and the westward expansion related to the *Plan of Union* in 1801 with the Presbyterians.

Disestablishment came slowly for New England Congregational churches. For nearly two hundred years they had been in the privileged position of being the "official churches" of the colonies. Not until 1818 did Connecticut cut the churches loose from the state. Lyman Beecher, one of the most vigorous clerics of the time and, at first, a strenuous opponent of disestablishment, later declared it to be "the best thing that ever happened in the State of Connecticut" because "it cut the churches loose from dependence on state support" and "threw them wholly on their own resources and God."³¹ Massachusetts was the last of the New England states to enact disestablishment, in 1831.

Relationships among Congregational churches in New England were not significantly changed by disestablishment. Thrown "on their own resources before God," the churches managed very well. Changes came chiefly as a result of two other closely related developments: the use of voluntary organizations to carry on missionary and philanthropic activity and the westward expansion of the nation. The opening of upper and western New York State following the peace with England attracted many New England Congregationalists. As early as 1798 a missionary society was formed in Connecticut. Voluntary support was the key to the capability of the churches to meet the needs of newly organized congregations on the western frontier.

In 1801 a *Plan of Union* was adopted by the Connecticut Congregational Association and the Presbyterian General Assembly for the express purpose of collaboration in missionary work in the new Northwest Territory. By a sharing of

*Organization of churches into regional (and later, national) bodies came slowly but was hastened by disestablishment after the nation's constitution was adopted. In the Anglican (Episcopal) churches the first American bishop was consecrated in 1784, and by 1789 the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA was organized. Methodist Church organization dates from the famous Christmas Conference in December of 1784. Although Puritan Presbyterians had organized Presbyteries much earlier, it was not until 1789 that a full Presbyterian government was established. Churches of Continental lineage did not organize as larger bodies until the 1820s and 30s.

missionaries and ministers there was hope that the pressing needs of the new churches could be met. The *Plan of Union* symbolized Congregationalism's recognition of the new era of religious pluralism in which new forms of regional and national church organization would be necessary to meet the religious needs of a growing population. The emerging new form was the denomination. Many years were to pass, however, before Congregational churches would move specifically in that direction. Churches dependent upon a connectional system, such as the Presbyterian and Methodist, were rapidly becoming purposive organizations with a national character. Because local independency was cherished by Congregationalists they were at a disadvantage in relating to a connectional system. The consequence was the eventual breakdown of the *Plan of Union*, which resulted in many Congregational churches in New York becoming Presbyterian.

The moving force behind denominational expansion was the Second Great Awakening. In New England the Second Awakening began as early as 1792 at Yale but did not touch the churches extensively until 1798 to 1801. In contrast to the western frontier phase of this Awakening, the New England experience was marked by quiet zeal and fervor, without the emotional phenomenon encouraged by the revivalists of the First Awakening. New England's Awakening at the turn of the century resulted in a remarkable outpouring of lay energies in voluntary societies for missionary work, education, publication, and moral reform. It fired the zeal of the Connecticut Missionary Society. The new spiritual fervor of the churches resulted in the establishment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1812 and of the American Home Missionary Society in 1826. Although interdenominational at first, these societies were later supported almost solely by Congregational churches.

Thus, evangelistic and missionary zeal rooted in the Second Awakening, coupled with the expanded use of voluntary societies, accounted for New England's Congregational contribution to the forming of the near West in the first half of the nineteenth century. Churches were organized as far west as the Mississippi River and beyond by midcentury. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, in remarking about the extension of the Puritan heritage westward, wrote:

The emergence of such "little New Englands" had a striking effect not only on the religious nature of the western communities, but also on their political, economic, and cultural life; for this reason, it constitutes a highly significant factor in any estimate of Puritan influence on American life.³²

Apart from the *Plan of Union* of 1801 there is little in the first four decades of the nineteenth-century Congregational expansion to indicate a concern about Congregationalism as such. The Congregational pattern of local church life was ideally suited to the needs of newly developing communities as New Englanders moved into New York, Ohio, Michigan, and farther westward. Moved by the

fervor for the gospel generated in the Awakening in their home communities, Congregationalists "gathered" into churches for worship and education. Ministers (clergy) were needed, but it was lay initiative that counted. Cooperation with other New Englanders, especially those of Presbyterian leanings, was natural.

Congregational self-awareness was heightened in these new communities by strife and division within the Presbyterian Church. Cooperation under the *Plan of Union* became more difficult. Because their Presbyterian partners were often embroiled in their own controversies, Congregationalists became more aware of their own church tradition. On a comparative basis the Congregational form of organization offered a freedom that was attractive to those who found the voluntary system of organization a way of accomplishment. Growing self-consciousness about polity, then, was the result.

From self-consciousness about traditions, to considerations of polity, and thence to a gradual adoption of a denominational character and form of organization was the movement resulting from expansion westward.³³ Although the first state conference of Congregational churches was organized in Maine in 1826, that level of organization received its greatest impetus from the rapid expansion in the midwestern states many decades later.³⁴ In many respects, however, growing national consciousness as a "denomination" preceded state-level organizations of churches. Only associations of ministers were generally accepted on a statewide basis.

National consciousness and a national-level organization of churches were not the same thing for Congregationalists. The traditional emphasis upon and concern for the local church continually inhibited the concept of a larger organization of churches. Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley have argued that national consciousness was inhibited by:

- (1) The tradition that the duty of the local church was for the religious leadership in the local community;
- (2) The fear that a national organization would interfere with the freedom of the local church;
- (3) The continuing influence of the writings of Rev. John Wise in Massachusetts and other New England states;
- (4) The unconstitutional action of the Massachusetts General Association in establishing the American Board; and
- (5) The unfortunate results that followed establishment by the Connecticut Association of the Plan of Union.³⁵

National organization, if it was ever to be, had a powerful history to overcome. Only in the later part of the nineteenth century, when the energies of the western churches began to be felt, would that occur. On the expanding frontier, history tended to be left behind.

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES AS A DENOMINATION: TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Within the complex of religious, cultural, and economic forces that moved Congregational churches toward the denominational form of organization were some impulses produced in reaction to adverse events and circumstances. Two of these may be cited: the Unitarian break in Massachusetts and the *Plan of Union* debacle.

Liberalizing trends in Massachusetts have already been noted for their influence upon New England Congregationalism, effectively distinguishing between the churches affected by the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the Great Awakening, on the other. Boston was the center of liberal influence, although not all the churches there belonged in that category. Unitarian perspectives emerged within the rather widespread theological milieu of Arminianism in the late eighteenth century.³⁶ Fed by the Enlightenment and shaped in reaction to the Great Awakening and Edwardian Calvinism, the Arminian theology of the liberals developed in a direction that affirmed the growing self-image of the American as a new kind of person—not caught in the bondage of a depraved nature but free and capable of the good. Human ability, so limited in the traditional Calvinist view, was not without the possibility of sin but could be nurtured in the good by the grace of God.*

Such views were the core substance of Boston sermons for more than fifty years. Received with approval, especially among the more affluent, they created an atmosphere that was increasingly content with the privileged place of the churches in Boston society. This made them fiercely zealous of Congregational independency and autonomy. The event that precipitated the sharp break with the more orthodox congregations was the need for two appointments to be made at Harvard College. The undercurrent of orthodox resentment toward liberal thinking came out into the open when appointments were called for publicly in the orthodox tradition. Immediate and vigorous response from the liberals opened the debate that came to be known as the Unitarian controversy. Ranged on the orthodox side were such figures as Jedidiah Morse, Leonard

*The Arminianism of the New England liberals must be defined within the context of the social and cultural development of Boston and its environs. This is the argument advanced by Conrad Wright (*The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* [Boston: Starr King Press, 1955]), who wrote: "Arminianism was not a disembodied set of ideas; adopted for various capricious reasons by scattered individuals. It was part of the culture of a group. . . . The New England liberals were called Arminians, not because they were influenced directly by Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), the Dutch Remonstrant, but because their reaction against Calvinism was similar to his" (pp. 5-6). American Arminianism was a distinctive product, then, of the Puritan ethos and its amalgamation of the Enlightenment thrust with the new self-perceptions of the American as a person. Wright's book is also invaluable for understanding the whole range of Unitarian concepts of the period.

Woods, and Moses Stuart. On the other side, charged with being Unitarians, were William Ellery Channing, Henry Ware, Samuel Thatcher, and others.

The break between churches of the Unitarian perspective and those of the orthodox tradition became visible in 1820, when Channing called for "a means of intercourse" among those who shared his views. Atkins and Fagley comment on this:

When a Separatist movement begins to be accelerated with "prayers and counsels," the end is in sight. The leaders of the movement seemed to have been reluctant to become a separate denomination; partly, one may hope, through sentiment, partly because, being markedly independent, they feared any suggestion of denominational control, and partly (though this is mere surmise) they did not know exactly what to become or how with entire agreement to designate themselves.³⁷

The forming of a Unitarian Association took place in 1825, thus effectively marking a permanent schism in New England Congregational ranks.

One distinction provokes another. When the Unitarian churches declared themselves, their sister churches of the Puritan tradition grew in self-awareness and in their sense of common cause in the orthodox Congregational mode. The sense of common cause expressed itself in renewed missionary zeal and in collaborative efforts to meet the needs of an expanding nation.

The *Plan of Union* of 1801 with the Presbyterians, probably because of its failure, can be credited with having set in motion a series of national gatherings that eventually gave the Congregational churches a denomination-like structure. As is often the case in developments of this kind, the outcome was unintended. The title of the agreement worked out between the General Association of Connecticut and the Presbyterian General Assembly did not imply a plan for uniting national bodies. Its intention was "to prevent alienation, and to promote union and harmony in those new settlements which are composed of inhabitants from these bodies."³⁸ Inaugurated with enthusiasm, the *Plan* actually resulted in "alienation" among these Presbyterians and Congregationalists who had a common Puritan heritage. That was the negative side of the unintended effect. The positive side was Congregational awareness of the need for the united action of their churches to abrogate the *Plan of Union*.

Although unhappiness with the *Plan of Union* had grown to much bitterness over the years, renunciation of it came slowly simply because there was no established organizational channel through which such unhappiness could produce action. Dissatisfaction was not all on one side; the Presbyterians—torn by doctrinal strife—were sufficiently displeased by 1837 to withdraw. Not until 1852 were the Congregational churches able to act in concert. The occasion was the Albany Convention in 1852.

Abrogation of the *Plan of Union*, although the immediate cause of the Albany Convention, was not the substantive cause. A much more significant

agenda of concerns had been building over the years. These were announced in the call to the Convention issued by the General Association of New York and included items having to do with: relationships between churches in the various states, the American Home Missionary Association, building new churches, and common understanding of what Congregationalism is in respect to its theology and its practices. More than anything else, those agenda items reveal the growing influence of Congregational self-consciousness—the basic ingredient of denominational identification. Subsequent general conventions confirmed this by their steady testimony to reliance upon the Congregational mode of church life.

The experience of the Albany Convention, supplemented by a host of growing concerns, which again illustrate Congregational self-consciousness, led to a second national gathering. This one, held in Boston during June 1865, was noteworthy for the amount of discussion given to defining Congregationalism. An important element of that defining process was the concern to retain the advantages of local church independency, while responding in some united way to the crises brought on by the Civil War. Within that concern was also recognition of the need to "state the faith." Significantly, the most quoted product of the Boston Council was the *Burial Hill Declaration*.³⁹ This statement of faith occasioned lengthy debate. Its chief significance lies in explicit concern for "the union of all true believers"—disunity being "the shame and scandal of Christendom"—and in a commitment to work for "restoring unity to the divided Church." The inclusion of this concern for unity in a council moving toward denominational definition for Congregational churches is of significance for understanding later calls for unity.

A reiteration of polity principles reminiscent of the *Saybrook Platform*, except for substitution of hortatory for penal language, was also adopted in Boston. Its most striking sentence bears quotation:

That the ministry of the gospel by members of the churches who have been duly called and set apart to that work implies in itself no power of government, and that ministers of the gospel not elected to office in any church are not a hierarchy, nor are they invested with any official power in or over the churches.⁴⁰

In that statement was a clear delimitation of the power of the office of ministry, which has ever since differentiated the Congregational from the Presbyterian understanding of the ordained minister's role in the churches of the Reformed tradition.

The Albany and Boston meetings had advanced the common cause of Congregational churches throughout the nation by giving them a sense of identity in their faith, history, and polity. However, no continuing general organization was anticipated or proposed in those meetings. That step was taken at Oberlin in 1871 when the National Council of Congregational Churches was organized. The heart of the agreement adopted was in the paragraph that declared:

The churches, therefore, while establishing this National Council for the furtherance of the common interests and work of all the churches, do maintain the Scriptural and inalienable right of each church to self-government and administration; and this National Council shall never exercise legislative or judicial authority, nor consent to act as a council of reference.⁴¹

Provisions were made for regular meetings on a triennial basis, for representation of the churches through delegates composed of both ministers and laity, for officers to serve from one triennial session to another, and for a provisional committee to make arrangements for succeeding sessions. Thus, the Congregational churches, after two hundred fifty years on the American scene, became a denomination by establishing a continuing organization to implement common purposes and to enhance the relationship of the churches to one another.

The 1871 Oberlin Council made history in yet another way. Adoption of a "Declaration on the Unity of the Church" gave the new denomination a sense of destiny. The words of the final paragraph of that declaration were expressive of the concern for Christian unity affirmed in all the Reformed tradition.

We believe in "the holy catholic church." It is our prayer and endeavor, that the unity of the church may be more and more apparent, and that the prayer of our Lord for his disciples may be speedily and completely answered, and all be one; that by consequence of this Christian unity in love, the world may believe in Christ as sent of the Father to save the world.⁴²

CONGREGATIONALISM AND FREEDOM'S FERMENT

To recount the organizational development of the Congregational churches in the nineteenth century without recognition of their role in the Protestant shaping of the young nation is to pass over much of the story of the continuing Puritan impulse to which historians point. That impulse expressed itself in "freedom's ferment," particularly during the pre-Civil War years.⁴³ At that time its energies were thrown into evangelizing the new settlements of the West and into humanitarian endeavors to meet ever-increasing social problems, particularly slavery. Following the war that impulse exhibited itself in the evangelical liberalism which produced, on the one hand, the Social Gospel and, on the other, the extension of a Protestant empire through the denominational network.⁴⁴

Evangelism and humanitarian endeavor were not confined to the Congregational churches in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but these churches were uniquely free to respond to the claims laid upon them by their faith and by the society. Unfettered by ecclesiastical structures, Congregationalists gave expression to their evangelistic and humanitarian impulses by organizing a vast array of voluntary societies. Inheritors of a Calvinist faith (translated in Edwardian categories) in which the sovereign rule of God implied

the restraint of evil and the transformation of individuals and the society, these Christians poured their energies into the voluntary agencies with a serene confidence in the rightness of their causes and in the possibility of achievement.

Although many causes attracted their concern, by the fourth decade one cause dominated: the antislavery movement. Abolitionist sentiment and activity flourished in New England, gradually overcoming antagonism and crystallizing public opinion. Even evangelization and missionary societies took up the cause as Christian awareness was heightened. This confluence of evangelizing energies and humanitarian concern in the antislavery movement issued in an organization whose history extended beyond the Civil War, through the Reconstruction, to the present. That organization is the American Missionary Association.

The story of this remarkable organization, which continues as a corporate entity within the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, epitomizes the major strains of the religious humanitarian impulses of the Awakenings. Both its long history and the focus of its work, particularly in education, exemplify the special qualities of the voluntary societies of the nineteenth century. Organized in 1846, it brought together several other groups involved in the antislavery movement. Clara Merritt De Boer has called attention to the unique feature of its charter—directing its concern not simply to Blacks but to the "elimination of caste"—and to the fact that a large number of Afro-Americans were active supporters and workers in the association.⁴⁵ The educational focus of its work during the Reconstruction earned for it the commendation of being the "most effective of these church-oriented agencies for the freedman."⁴⁶

Unlike the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians, the Congregationalists were free of the severe strains of sectional division caused by the slavery issue and the Civil War. Few New England Congregationalists migrated southward. Their migration carried them across New York State into Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and westward. They were a northern group, and, in addition, they lacked the connectional system that gave way under sectional conflict. The result was the direction of energies toward constructive service in the voluntary societies.

CONGREGATIONALISTS AND A CHRISTIAN AMERICA

The Protestant vision of a Christian civilization shaped by America was a major force in denominational activity and expansion following the Civil War. Congregationalists shared that vision widely and contributed some of the most influential voices to the interpretation of it. Horace Bushnell, whose name has been remembered longer than almost any other theologian of that period because of his book *Christian Nurture*, was one of the earlier Congregational theologian-pastors to hold aloft that vision. His words have been frequently quoted:

The wilderness shall bud and blossom as the rose before us; and we will not cease, till a christian nation throws up its temples of worship on every hill and plain; till knowledge, virtue and religion, blending their dignity and their healthful power, have filled our great country with a manly and happy race of people, and the bands of a complete christian commonwealth are seen to span the continent.⁴⁷

In the post-Civil War period this theme was picked up in chauvinistic fashion by many denominational leaders as a way of giving focus to their ambitious programs. In such expressions the real spirit of evangelical liberalism was lost. Dreams of a "righteous empire" tended to be far removed from the spirit of the Christ.

Nevertheless, there were positive and constructive voices during the same period calling attention to Christian responsibility for dealing with the difficult issues of the society. What was known as the Social Gospel movement drew heavily upon the transformationist emphases of evangelical liberalism. Although the name of Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist, is most prominently identified with the Social Gospel, it was Josiah Strong, a Congregational minister, who provided creative leadership in the implementation of the vision. Strong was a disciple of Bushnell and reflected the latter's visionary stance. At the same time, however, he was a keen social analyst and a superior organization shaper. Along with others in the Congregational fellowship, he helped to focus the concern of the churches upon the growing urban crises brought on by industrialization. Other voices of national prominence on the scene of social concern were Washington Gladden and Graham Taylor.

Adding to the vision of a Christian America, so prominent among the Congregationalists of the period, was the consistent commitment to education, which over the years gave to the nation more than forty colleges and a dozen theological seminaries. The passion for education, the cultivation of reason, and the enlightenment of the mind were first in the service of the gospel. Education of ministers was the primary motive for the establishment of many schools, with Harvard leading the way in 1638, followed by Yale and many others as the years went on. Equally important, however, was the commitment to a vision of life in which the transformation of the person required intellectual nurture. Westward expansion of Congregational churches can be traced by the colleges and seminaries established along the way as far as the West Coast.

Perhaps some of the most severe testing of the vision of a Christian America came through the challenge to the churches posed by the vast immigration of peoples, particularly from Europe. Congregationalists intent upon their home missionary task did not neglect those who came from the Continent. Providing ministerial leadership for the large number of German- and Scandinavian-speaking immigrants who pushed westward from Chicago became a major objective of Chicago Theological Seminary, which had been founded in 1855.

Foreign-language programs were an essential part of the curriculum. Absorption of different ethnic peoples gave the Congregational churches an ever-increasing pluralistic character.

THE ERA OF DENOMINATIONAL CONSOLIDATION

One question that never failed of discussion through the years of denominational formation from 1852 onward was over the matter of polity. How is Congregationalism defined? Every step toward cooperative action and new relationships required review of whether and in what way the basic principle of local church independence could be accommodated to the new proposals. Two kinds of relationships became increasingly important from 1871 onward: those involving the National Council with the conferences and associations, and those that brought the various voluntary movements in missionary work, education, and publication into the purview of National Council concerns.

When the bylaws were written for the National Council in 1871, the voting membership was assigned to delegates from associations and conferences. This had the effect of enhancing particularly the role of the state conferences. As national organization assumed an ever larger place in the total denominational scene, and as the number of churches increased in far-flung parts of the nation, the state conference became a necessary link between the local churches and the National Council. In 1907 the National Council urged that state conferences take the initiative in the planting of new churches, thus supporting local churches in their extension concerns.⁴⁸ This action marked a significant shift of some aspects of missionary responsibility from the voluntary societies to structures created by and responsible to the churches.

As early as the Boston Council in 1865, concerns were being expressed about the channeling of local church support to the many voluntary societies engaged in missionary, educational, and humanitarian work. The major societies of concern to Congregationalists had at one time drawn their support from more than one denomination. As other denominations developed their own national structures and created agencies for their work, support of some of the voluntary groups was confined to Congregational churches. This was particularly true of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Missionary Association, the Congregational Home Missionary Society, and the Education Society.

While the 1871 National Council recognized one delegate from each of the "Congregational" societies,⁴⁹ voting privileges were not accorded to them until 1901. The major motivation for closer relationships between the societies and the National Council was a concern to ensure adequate support while also giving to the churches some "sense of ownership." The latter became the crux of the problem since legal ownership was already invested in the controlling boards of these societies. Nevertheless, if the churches were to have any claim

laid upon them for supporting the work that was still important to them, a sense of ownership was essential. The Connecticut General Conference put the matter plainly, stating that the mission boards, "though vitally related to the Congregational churches in every point of fact, are nevertheless wholly independent of them in law and management; and that these facts not only discredit our polity, but threaten our peace."⁵⁰

Matters of this kind were not easily concluded, and they continued to be the focus of attention in subsequent National Councils. The growing financial needs of the boards and societies added pressure for some resolution of the complicated issues. An advisory and consultative relationship lacked the essential ingredient of an administrative role with authority from the churches. One committee after another was assigned the task of finding a solution. The Committee of Fifteen, the Committee of Seven, the Commission of Nineteen, the Committee of Twelve, the Strategy Committee—all in succession over the years offered proposals that were accepted either in part or in whole. The Kansas City National Council, in 1917, took a step that at least identified the boards and societies with the council. *Voting members of the council were made voting members of the societies.*⁵¹ While thus ensuring a relationship of common concerns, this did not give control to either the churches or the council. Control remained vested in the corporate boards of directors by law. Nevertheless, the relationship thus established gave the council more influence in the promotional and educational work of the boards.

Partly as a consequence of this new relationship and partly because of changing circumstances in which their work had to be carried out, there was a gradual process of consolidation of the societies working in the same general areas. The result was concentration of all foreign mission groups in the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and of several home mission and educational societies in the Board for Home Missions.

Recognition of the growing need for administrative services on the part of the National Council eventuated, after many hesitant steps, in assigning new responsibilities to an executive committee. When this was done in 1936, the Congregational churches had completed movements toward national organization begun sixty-five years earlier.

Tension between local church autonomy and the requirements of responsible fellowship remained. They were heightened whenever the requirements of the gospel led to a sense of responsibility for new undertakings. This came to a critical point in the union that moved the Congregationalists into the United Church of Christ in 1957.

AND THEY BECAME THE CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

In recounting the development of a denominational organization for the Congregational churches, no attention has been given thus far to efforts to imple-

ment the concern for Christian unity. That concern was expressed repeatedly as the denominational organization took shape. Atkins and Fagley comment that "no other religious body in America has made as many gestures toward union with other religious bodies as have the various National Councils."⁵²

Denominational organization itself, of course, posed problems of a special kind for the Congregationalists with respect to the question of unity. Their voluntary "associational" relationship made it relatively easy for individual local churches to affiliate with a Congregational association.* However, the union of the national organs of the Congregational Churches with other national structures tended to be more complicated.

On two occasions the National Council acted to recognize other groups of churches as conferences on parity with state conferences. The effect was to give such conferences representation in the National Council. One such action, in 1925, was to recognize the Evangelical Protestant Conference. Made up of a small number of German "union" (Lutheran and Reformed) churches in western Pennsylvania, this conference later disappeared as the congregations were absorbed into the state conference.

In many respects a more important event of the same kind took place in 1927, when the General Conference of German Congregational Churches was given parity recognition. This group of churches is one of the best illustrations of the energetic missionary work carried on among German immigrants by Congregational churches and the American Home Missionary Society. George Eisenach has traced the history of the General Conference from its beginnings in Iowa, calling the State of Iowa "the cradle of German Congregationalism in the United States."⁵³

It was the American Home Missionary Society that responded to the needs of the Germans there by bringing ministers and missionaries from Germany and Switzerland. As that effort among the Germans grew, they organized associations, sought twice to establish schools for the training of ministers in the German language, and became a conference in 1883. The role of the society was augmented in 1882, when Chicago Theological Seminary agreed to establish a German department to take over the theological training of ministers that had been started at Crete, Nebraska four years earlier. The positive influence of this department over the years is acknowledged again and again by Eisenach.⁵⁴ In 1936 there were 215 congregations scattered in the northwestern states. Many of them maintained their identity out of a later immigration of German-Russians after 1872. These German people had first migrated to the Odessa and Volga regions of Russia and then, after many generations, found life there too restrictive. They found freedom in the United States, settling in the Dakotas and other western states.

*This was the way some Congregational Methodist churches became part of the Congregational fellowship in 1892. Those churches had originally formed in Georgia before the Civil War.

The chief concern in this section of the chapter, however, is the union in 1931 of the National Council of Congregational Churches and the General Convention of Christian Churches. Discussions about the possibility of union had been undertaken in 1894. These were terminated in 1898, when some sections of the Christian Church expressed strong opposition. Conversations were reopened in 1923. A Plan of Union was drawn up and adopted by both bodies in 1929. Consummation came in 1931, when the National Council and the General Convention met concurrently in Seattle. The name of the newly formed church body was the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches.

Several features of this union merit special consideration. First, it brought together a church body whose birthright had been established in the Second Great Awakening in frontier situations and a body whose birthright had been established in the first colonial settlements. Second, it was the only union for either group up to that time despite repeated declarations of unity intentions throughout their long histories. Third, it gave the new denomination a wider geographical distribution of churches.

The Christian Church was itself the result of a "flowing together" of three quite diverse groups, initially located in Virginia, New England, and Kentucky, and drawing from the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians. James O'Kelly, a Methodist lay preacher in Virginia, rallied a group of Methodists who shared his convictions about democracy in church government. Known first as "Republican Methodists" because of their opposition to an episcopal system, these followers of O'Kelly assembled themselves in a general meeting in 1794. The name, Christian Church, was taken as a symbol of their noncreedal, New Testament, faith stance. The test of membership was simply "a Christian character." Most important was the insistence upon the parity of laity and clergy in all matters.

A few years later and several hundred miles to the northeast another "Christian" movement was born, when Abner Jones formed the first "free Christian Church" in New England.⁵⁵ Protesting standard New England church membership requirements—Calvinist doctrine, baptism, and a restricted communion table—Jones also insisted upon Christian character as the only requirement for membership. Known as the "Christian Connection," the churches following Jones' principles eventually organized the New England Christian Convention in 1845. Because of the noncreedal tenet some of these churches became Unitarian.

The origins of the third group that became a founding part of the Christian Church are less easily identified, except for the fact that, as in the case of the Abner Jones movement in New England, it shared a common frontier dissatisfaction with Calvinist theology. When Barton W. Stone, moved by the impulses of the Second Awakening, withdrew with a group of followers from the

Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky in 1803, they also took the simple name "Christian."⁵⁶ These churches spread into Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

What brought these three "Christian" movements together? Historians have pointed to two incidents that have undoubtedly played a part in their convergence. One of James O'Kelly's co-workers was Rice Haggard, a dedicated and untiring exponent of New Testament simplicity. Haggard is known to have worked among the Kentucky churches of the Stone movement, thus establishing common ground. Contact with the Jones group of churches in New England was given a boost when Haggard wrote an article addressed "To the Different Societies on the Sacred Import of the Name Christian." When this appeared in the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, a paper published by the New England Christian Connection churches, the movement gained visibility. James O'Kelly likewise wrote an article for the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* in which he discussed "A Plan of Union Proposed," giving a long list of reasons for the union of all Christians. Some years passed before any formal meetings occurred, but in 1820 the United General Conference of Christians was held in Connecticut.

William T. Scott argues that the convergence of these groups, each with such different beginnings but with a common passion for Christian union, was the work of God.⁵⁶ Six principles were unanimously affirmed for the basis of their common venture as the Christian Church: (1) Christ as the only head of the church; (2) the name Christian so as to exclude party distinctions; (3) the holy scriptures as the only rule of faith and practice; (4) Christian character as the only requirement for membership; (5) the right of private judgment and liberty of conscience; (6) the union of all of Christ's followers.

There were in all three groups and in their subsequent development as a denomination the distinctive marks of the Awakening in the frontier settlements. The frontier tended to elevate and exaggerate traits of the Awakening, which in New England were muted by the tradition of a more settled social situation. They were the "levelling" tendencies that dominated the frontier spirit of democracy, the anticreedalism that moved toward biblical literalism, and the extreme individualism that issued from the claim to the right of private judgment and liberty of conscience. An egalitarian idealism emerged in the frontier conditions that affected the churches as well as the society generally. In the churches (in varying degrees according to the different traditions) it supplanted the authority of tradition.

All of this, however, continued to exhibit the primal Puritan rootage of so much of American Protestantism. Nurtured in the soil of frontier life, that root-

⁵⁶Some of the churches of Stone's movement later entered into local unions with another group that was using the names "Christian" and "Disciples of Christ"—a group having its origins in the work of Alexander Campbell. The latter group eventually became the largest indigenous body of Protestants in the land. The connection in the 1830s has resulted in much confusion, especially for those churches under discussion in this chapter.

age produced an understanding of church life completely different from that of the New England "establishment." William T. Scott, for example, uses nontraditional terms to define the distinctive nature of the Christian Church: "a spiritual democracy, a religious brotherhood, a Christian fellowship."⁵⁷ New beginnings in family life, community building, and civil government on the frontier encouraged new beginnings in models of church life.

Two other marks of the New England Puritan roots of the Christian Church movement in its beginning years must be noted: a leadership drawn from the well-educated New England dominant social class and a humanitarian spirit. The frontier was rough and crude; life was marked by vice and violence. But at the same time the religious leadership generally represented the civility and compassion of educated people. Herein were the foundations of the concern for education that later involved this "frontier-formed" denomination to establish colleges, to enter missionary work with zeal, and to undertake humanitarian causes.

The concern for humanitarian reform was signaled in founder James O'Kelly's denunciation of slavery in 1789, long before the abolition movement gained public support.⁵⁸ That concern, linked with the revivalistic zeal of the Awakening, brought many Blacks into the Christian churches in the South. As early as 1848 the Christian Church ordained a Black to serve as a missionary in Liberia.⁵⁹ It appears, however, that Black churches as such were not organized until after the Civil War. As a matter of record, efforts to achieve a greater consolidation of the three sections of Christian Churches, which by that time had increased in number, were shattered in 1844 over the slavery issue. The New England Convention at that time produced a strong resolution against slavery which deeply offended the churches in the South. Formation of the Southern Christian Association was the result, thus keeping the New England and southern churches apart.⁶⁰

Ruptured relationships resulting from the Civil War took many years to heal. Meanwhile, in the era of Reconstruction, the Christian Churches both north and south became more denominational in character. The evolving of a denomination from what was primarily a movement quite naturally brought changes that were not always easily accepted. In a time of rapid growth of other denominations, the Christian Churches became aware of their own limited growth. In the 1870s several steps were taken to give the Southern Convention more organization structure and more explicit identity. For the latter purpose a *Manual* was adopted, standardizing practices of worship and the rites and supplying a statement of "Principles."

In the postwar period Blacks withdrew from white churches and formed their own. By 1867 the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference was formed. Other conferences of Black churches followed. In 1892 the Afro-American Christian Convention was established in North Carolina. At that time sixty-nine

churches with 3,395 members were reported.⁶¹ By 1929 the Afro-American Convention reported to the General Convention of the Christian Church a total of one hundred sixty-five churches and over 30,000 members.⁶²

From the beginning of the Christian Church movement, the theme of Christian unity was sounded repeatedly. When the General Convention assembled in 1874, the delegates adopted a *Manifesto* setting forth principles of unity. Prompted in part by the involvement of several leaders who had participated in the international Evangelical Alliance,⁶³ the *Manifesto* reflected the fundamental sense of the Christian Church movement that unity is primarily a matter of Christian spirit and character. No unity in doctrine or polity was considered possible; only that which springs from the love and forbearance of "true Christians." In that spirit the *Manifesto* concludes: "We are ready to form a corporate union with any body of Christians upon the basis of those great doctrines which underlie the religion of Christ. . . . We are ready to submit all minor matters to . . . the individual conscience."⁶⁴

Unity, for all of such declarations, came no more easily for the Christian Church movement than it did for other denominations. Doctrine and polity are not the only things that divide the body of Christ; the spirit of love and forbearance that Christian character should manifest is always countered by human self-concern (thus defensiveness), prejudice, and the limits of understanding. Efforts to reunite the northern and southern groups of these churches were inhibited by these factors. Finally, however, in 1890, a Plan of Union was adopted, bringing the American Convention of Christian Churches (north) and the General Convention (south) into the new General Convention. No central organization was established, but a pattern of collaboration was begun, although not without friction.⁶⁵

CONGREGATIONALISM LOOKING AHEAD

The 1931 union, which brought this convention with the National Council of Congregational Churches into the new body known as the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches, marked a watershed of denominational development of Congregationally organized churches. Church union was abroad in the land, and no church body was more concerned about it. In ten other nations Congregational churches as national bodies had entered into union with other communions between 1900 and 1950, with a consequent disappearance of the "congregational" name.

The process of church union challenged Congregational Christian Churches to reconsider their basic theology of the church—to go farther back into their tradition than simply the nineteenth century. In response to that challenge they discovered anew a point of view that guided their Puritan forebears. Whether separatist or nonseparatist, unity in Christ required expression. The church is one. If separation seemed necessary, it was only a step toward re-forming the

church. In such a conception the church is understood as the Body of Christ. The one Head of the church is its reality as a unity even where the church is not all together in one place. Because the Lord gathers the church, the local church is, as Peter Forsyth said, "but the outcrop of the total and continuous Church. . . . People did not go to a meeting which was on its way to become a Church; they went to *the Church* at a certain place of meeting. . . . It is not a Church with sympathies with others, it was *the Church*, and there were no others—only similar outcrops of the one . . . Church."⁶⁶

In this movement back toward their fundamental English Reformed tradition, the Congregational Christian Churches found church union in terms of denominational structures a real possibility. In that tradition the forms or organs of the church as an organization are always provisional—related to the realities of the society in which Christians live. The aim, however encumbered by limited human vision or circumstance, remains that of all who confess and know Christ to live the life of discipleship. The church, then, is where Christ lives in the midst of the people.